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Technical Authority:
Ideology, the Social Construction of Technology, and Technocracy

Jason Rodgers

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Technical Authority

Technology reproduces the ideology of the totality. As a technology proliferates, it changes the people and communities that use it, in subtle but total ways. This point should not be confused with technological determinism. Technology is socially constructed. Technology doesn't produce society. Society produces technology, and technology then produces society. Wolfi Landstreicher argued that technology *"always develops within a social context with the explicit aim of reproducing that context. Its form, its purpose and its possibilities are determined by that context, and this is precisely why no technology is neutral"* (Landstreicher 250).

This is not an argument that computers are evil. Morality does not play a part in this critique of technology. My primary point is that technology is not neutral, and that the notion of neutrality obscures and mystifies its influence. This is an influence that I find particularly negative in regard to freedom and autonomy.

It is often argued that a technology, such as the Internet, is just a tool. Well, certainly the Internet is a tool, but tools are also not neutral. Tools are also a product of the culture in which they develop, also a social construction. Tools reflect the values of these cultures. Cultures with different value sets create profoundly different tools. Kirkpatrick Sale said:

"Tools come with a prior history built in, expressing the values of a particular culture. A conquering, violent culture – of which western civilization is a prime example, with the United States as its extreme – is bound to produce conquering, violent tools. When U.S. industrialism turned to agriculture after World War II, for example, it went at it with all that it had learned on the battlefield, using tractors modeled on wartime tanks to cut up vast fields, crop dusters modeled on wartime planes to spray poison, and pesticides and herbicides developed from wartime chemical weapons and defoliants to destroy unwanted species" (Sale 262).

I would like to imagine that in a culture not based on domination that a whole new set of tools might develop, vastly different than most that we use today.

Media theorist Marshal McLuhan is often portrayed as a cheerleader for technological change, but actually he had a more nuanced viewpoint. To him, any technological change has at least two aspects, that *"Any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies"* (McLuhan 45). A person does not merely use a tool, the tool uses them. The object changes a person as they use it, allowing them to do certain things and eliminating the need to do others.

Technology causes changes over the entire social terrain. For instance, in technocracy the meaning of words changes. Take the word "expert", which Neil Postman characterized by saying that "technopoly's experts tend to be ignorant about any matter not directly related to their specialized interest" (Postman 87). Knowledge is broken down to such a degree that expertise in any facet requires systematic ignorance of all other aspects.

replicate the ideology of the military-industrial complex from which they arose. As they spread, they transform society more and more towards this regimented form.

None of this is meant to outline what anyone should do, how they should live, or what technology they should use. Most people live directly within the technological society, and survival will require some use of its technology. However, by critically examining technology, it is possible to determine which are personally distasteful and unpleasant, through which one could refuse them to increase the quality of their life. Furthermore, this will hopefully contribute to the development of tactical anti-media and an awareness of pressure points on which to focus resistance.

Should we ever be lucky enough to see the toppling of authoritarian society, technology would go with it. Without coercion and social control, there would be no one willing to do the alienating and demeaning labor required to maintain industrial society. Without wage slave shit workers and literal slave labor, it cannot be maintained. The society that would arise would certainly have some sort of tools and technology, but it would not be the sort one would generally call “tech”. It would most likely be low tech, the sort of objects that could be created by individuals and individual-scale communities.

With high tech devices, there is the additional dimension of being a product of massive divisions of labor. In a technological society, it becomes impossible to live autonomously. Every aspect of society is broken down and each person builds an isolated aspect. The process of manufacturing these tools remakes the world, through strip mines, economic slavery, and manufacturing processes which release highly toxic chemicals. Green tech is no exception, requiring the same manufacturing processes and alienating labor as any other industrial product.

A certain mythology has built up around technology, a mythology which serves an ideological purpose. Critics of technology are portrayed as being conservative, even as high technology has often been the underpinning of totalitarian regimes. James Carey wrote, *“Instead of creating a ‘new future,’ modern technology invites the public to participate in a ritual of control in which fascination with technology masks underlying factors of politics and power”* (Carey 195).

The very notion of objectivity, of being able to look at pure data and understand reality, contains a sort of mystification. This mythology has a highly authoritarian basis. It is perfectly compatible with, and even complimentary to, totalitarian regimes. *“Information smacks of safe neutrality,”* wrote Theodore Roszak, *“it is the simple, helpful heaping up of unassailable facts. In that innocent guise, it is the perfect starting point for a technocratic political agenda that wants as little exposure for its objectives as possible”* (Roszak 19). Information is presented as being discrete bits of which one can gather enough to understand reality. Actually, these pieces of data are discovered by cutting the world into certain grids. There are an endless variety of ways that raw existence can be divided. It may be impossible to escape this, but it is important to remember this process and realize it is not some simple objective truth.

Guy Debord said, *"Isolation underpins technology, and technology isolates in its turn"* (Debord 22). Through technological systems, more and more of our lives are separated from other people. Individuals gradually lose their ties to others. What ties a person does have, are through the consumption of media. A key point of the anonymous book Test Card F was that the problems of media are intrinsic to the technology, not due to content:

"The media is integral to the maintenance of hierarchical social control. The external models of experts have supplanted our own lived experience. With social life mediated by a bureaucracy of image technicians, communal life has been disrupted and denied; a surrogate, supervised community is the replacement. Under these conditions, a small elite makes the rest of the people dependent on its tutelage [sic] for survival" (anonymous 78).

This is not individualism. The fact that leftists can characterize capitalism as individualistic demonstrates the poverty of language. The individual is reduced to an isolated component of a collectivist system. The breakdown of community in favor of a massive state corporatism is not individualism.

The reason I often target computers and the Internet is because they are probably the most omnipresent and prevalent of technologies. Computers absorb everything they touch. Other forms of media become computerized. Gradually, more and more goods are digitized. *"As the price of computing and bandwidth has plunged,"* wrote Nicholas Carr, *"it has become economical to transform more and more physical objects into purely digital goods, processing them with computers and transporting and trading them over networks"* (Carr 122). Social relationships are also digitized. Lee Siegel wrote, *"This new world turns the most consequential fact of human life – other people – into seemingly manipulable half-presences wholly available to our fantasies. It's a world controlled by our wrist and finger"* (Siegel 17). Computers are the dominant technology in everyday life.

Not only are computers the dominant technology, they are the technology of domination. *"Unlike most machines, computers do not work; they direct work,"* wrote Postman, *"They are, as Norbert Wiener said, the technology of 'command and control', and have little value without something to control"* (Postman 115). Computers allow surveillance and data gathering at a level that would otherwise be impossible. Wolfi Landstreicher wrote, *"Cybernetic technology's ability to process, record, gather and send information nearly instantaneously serves the needs of the state to document and monitor its subjects, as well as its need to reduce the real knowledge of those it rules to bits of information-data-hopping, thus, to reduce the real capacities for understanding of the exploited"* (Landstreicher 39). The most boring sorts of computer programs, like a database or a spreadsheet, are the core of effective surveillance. This reveals the utter banality of totalitarianism. The countless uses of technology for authoritarian ends should dispel the utopian mystification surrounding it. It seems clear that, as Nicholas Carr wrote:

"Computer systems are not, at their core, technologies of emancipation. They are technologies of control. They were designed as tools for monitoring and influencing human behavior, for controlling what people do and how they do it. As we spend more time online, filling databases with details of our lives and desires, software programs will grow every more capable of discovering and exploiting subtle patterns in our behavior" (Carr 191).

Looking at the origin of computer systems may help to explain why this is the case. The Internet finds its origin in cold war military systems, such as SAGE, a network of radar centers built across the US connected by *"some 1.5 million miles of dedicated phone lines"* (Lubar 148). Computers and the Internet